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SUBJECT: UPDATED KUWAIT DEMOCRATIC REFORM STRATEGY

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Classified By: CDA Alan Misenheimer for reason 1.4 (d).

[1](#)1. (U) Introduction: Kuwait proudly identifies itself as the region's oldest functioning democracy. Kuwaitis across the spectrum express continuing loyalty to the constitution, which establishes an elected National Assembly and separate executive, legislative, judicial branches. Respect for basic rights of free speech and assembly are ingrained in Kuwaiti society and are generally respected by the Government. Recent years have seen positive developments in Kuwait's democracy. Women won the right to vote and run for public office in 2005. Two women have been appointed as ministers since then and women ran for Parliament in the 2006 elections. A 2006 law has allowed the licensing of new daily newspapers for the first time in decades. The National Assembly tenaciously stood up to the Amir in 2006 by passing a law reducing the number of electoral districts. Nonetheless, there are challenges: citizens do not have the right to change their government; elections are free and fair overall, but there are credible reports of vote buying; corruption is pervasive in government institutions; the government payrolls are bloated with citizens unwilling to work in the private sector; politics frequently focuses on personal rivalries rather than public policy issues; and the Government is so paralyzed by indecision that important projects stagnate.

[1](#)2. (C) Kuwaitis recognize the need for political and economic reform. Even senior members of the Government have called for change. However, Kuwaitis from across the political spectrum are wary of any action that might threaten the current political stability and economic prosperity. Kuwaitis are keenly aware of external threats from Iran and Iraq and internal divisions -- Sunni-Shi'a, urban-tribal, liberal-conservative -- that could disrupt the status quo. Kuwaitis resent heavy-handed meddling from outside powers, including the U.S. The U.S. strategy for democratic reform in Kuwait must address the need for major political and economic change without providing fodder for opponents of change who will point to reform as a U.S. imposition. The U.S. strategy must also recognize the need to proceed with caution in a society with a significant degree of homegrown democracy and which has achieved a careful balance between potentially fractious elements of society. Greater success will come from supporting Kuwaiti initiatives and using global models rather than U.S.-specific examples.

[1](#)3. (S/NF) Priorities: In keeping with the strategy laid out in reftel B, democratization efforts in Kuwait should focus on: 1) enhancing the effectiveness of political associations; 2) supporting women's integration into the political system; and 3) encouraging responsible youth activism. Post's 2005 democracy strategy included encouraging the legalization of

political parties as a major goal (ref C). However, in the near term the legalization of parties would be likely to disproportionately benefit Islamists, who are the best organized of Kuwait's political groups. Legalizing parties is a necessity for Kuwait in the long term, but in the short term it is preferable to allow non-Islamist groups time to gain the requisite political organizational skills. Post will continue to encourage the professional development of Kuwait's media as well as refinements to the 2006 press and publications law, which still contains elements that restrict freedom of expression.

14. (S/NF) Desired Outcomes:

1A. Enhancing the Effectiveness of Political Associations

Strategy: Certain political groups, most notably the more underdeveloped liberal political associations, have expressed an interest in improving their organizational structures, strategic planning processes, and public relations skills. Helping them develop these skills through regional and in-country training programs will allow them to engage more meaningfully in the political process. Partnering with local organizations to implement this skills-based approach should be the key element of our overall democratization strategy in Kuwait.

Programming/Tactics: The specific skill areas in which local political and civil society leaders have identified training needs include: leadership and management; skillful and effective negotiation; political survey methodology; strategic planning; political organization; public relations; public sector advocacy; public speaking; and organizing grassroots activism. This skills-based approach has three

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key advantages. First, skills-based training is gender inclusive and can be extended to all local political associations and civil society organizations. Second, the training will largely benefit less-organized liberal and moderate groups and help balance the influence of Islamists in future parliamentary elections. Finally, this approach will be less immediately threatening to the Al Sabah leadership than pushing for the legalization of political parties or other intrusive political reforms. This reduces the likelihood of a near-term destabilizing political crisis that would work against democratization.

Consequences: Elections in Kuwait can occur at very short notice. The new electoral boundaries favor organized political groups, and tribal and Islamist forces currently are the best organized groups. U.S. assistance could help non-Islamist, non-tribally-based Kuwaiti political associations better articulate their platforms and more effectively reach their target audiences. Getting a political message out takes time, so development of the political associations should be an ongoing project for the foreseeable future.

1B. Desired Outcome: Women's Integration into the Political System

Strategy: In the 2006 parliamentary elections women succeeded in steering debate toward issues women cared about most. However, women candidates received disappointingly low numbers of votes and failed to win a single seat in Parliament. This is partly due to cultural obstacles, tribal voting and women's relative lack of political experience. But part of the problem also lay in the fact that women were seen as "women candidates" rather than simply as candidates. If women can better incorporate themselves into existing political organizations, they will stand better chances of winning elections. Perhaps more importantly, women will be able to influence mainstream political organizations to become active vehicles for advancing the interests of women. A number of women activists have invested a great deal of

energy in supporting some form of quota to ensure women's election to the parliament. Instituting a quota in Kuwait will be difficult and it will be more productive for women to channel their efforts into existing structures.

Programming/Tactics: Post suggests three avenues for enhancing women's integration into the political system. First, we should help Kuwaiti women learn lessons from the recent elections. Surveys will help identify ways women's rights activists can more effectively encourage Kuwaiti women to participate in the political process. Second, we should help women learn how to overcome traditional social barriers to advocate their political views effectively at the local, national, and regional levels. This could be done in part by drawing on the experience of female politicians and women's rights activists from other Arab countries. Third, we should actively target local women's groups for inclusion in the skills-based training programs suggested above. It is important for women to be better incorporated into existing political organizations rather than becoming marginalized in female-only activist groups outside the political mainstream.

Consequences: Women form a large majority of Kuwait's voting population (57%). While many women are conservative and will vote for Islamist or anti-U.S. candidates, increased women's participation in the political process will be a force for reform. This will be especially true if women are well-informed about their interests and how to use the political system to achieve these interests.

1C. Desired Outcome: Encouraging Responsible Youth Activism

Strategy: Young, politically active men and women are a potential source of reform in Kuwait. These youth activists, many of whom got started in politics through the National Union of Kuwaiti Students (NUKS), played an influential role in the pro-reform, anti-corruption rallies and subsequent elections in 2006. They represent a younger generation of Kuwaitis with an active interest in their country's political future and have infused the political system here with new life. Like Kuwaiti women, the key now is to help these young activists build on their successes, develop their political skills, and integrate more fully into the political system. As with the political associations, youth involved in Islamist political groups tend to be better organized and more effective, as witnessed by the Muslim Brotherhood's near sweep of student elections in October 2007.

Programming/Tactics: The USG should help local student organizations, especially the student parties at Kuwait University, to develop their political awareness and advocacy

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skills, and to identify future leaders for International Visitor Programs. It is also important to engage with NUKS-U.S., the organization's largest and most active overseas branch. Many of Kuwait's liberal political leaders have emerged from NUKS-U.S. and some of the leading youth activists have cited their involvement in NUKS-U.S. and volunteer activities in U.S. domestic political campaigns as the impetus for their political activism in Kuwait. As part of this effort, we should accelerate efforts to encourage Kuwaitis to study in the U.S. Post should expand on its current efforts (through MEPI small grants) to develop training programs similar to the ones outlined above specifically for students and recent graduates, equipping them with the tools they need to better understand political issues and effectively voice their opinions. We are also developing a cadre of young Kuwaitis who understand open political systems through our many exchange programs, including Youth Exchange and Study (YES) and Fulbright. These exchanges are proven, powerful tools of influence and we continue to encourage major expansion of these programs.

Consequences: More politically astute students will keep up pressure for reform. Empowering students to mobilize

themselves will erase the advantages currently enjoyed by
Islamist groups on Kuwaiti campuses and among Kuwaiti
students abroad.

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